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## **Conservation Committee Report 2023/24**

### **Deborah Evans, MA, CMLI, IHBC**

I was invited to step-up as Chair of the Conservation Committee in Spring 2024 as Chris Blandford, who has served as Chair for 2 years, needed to step back for personal reasons. I am delighted to tell you that Chris has now returned as an active member of the Committee, and I would like to thank him for his invaluable support to me during the past few months. I would also like to thank the Conservation Team: Margie Hoffnung, Alison Allighan and Daniel Bowles for their dedication and excellent work over the past year and a bit.

This has been a very demanding and peculiarly rewarding year for the Conservation Team and the Gardens Trust more widely. Through additional tasks asked of us by Government, we were able to review and confirm through our data record the delivery of our statutory consultee role. I am sure you will not be surprised to hear the Gardens Trust consistently delivers above its resources!

And our casework figures continue to grow. By April 2024 we, together with the CGTs, completed our switch to use the JCNAS (Joint Committee of National Amenity Societies) planning database from our old casework log. There are still challenges with this new system which we are gradually ironing out. We have provided training for our Conservation Team and for the CGTs to enable them to complete their own responses to planning applications. The database is not perfect, but we are all persevering and have been able to negotiate updates to help deliver our obligations and, crucially, to be able to extract data to record our efforts. This may sound tedious, but it is essential in these financially straightened times to be able prove our worth to Historic England and the Government who still fund our core conservation work.

In summary, figures submitted to Historic England for the first three months of 2023 were 351 statutory applications (including 15 pre applications) to which we were able to provide 282 responses. By April 2024, we had received 1733 statutory consultations and responded to 1309. The discrepancy in responses includes some Listed Building Consultations incorrectly referred to us, cases which are not relevant to the Gardens Trust's statutory duty, a few cases which are completely beyond our resources, and cases where either a local CGT did not respond or was out of time. April 2024 saw the receipt of 91 statutory planning applications which resulted in 74 responses, including 24 letters of substantial advice. We also received 80 Listed Building Consents which must be reviewed to determine whether they are of relevance to us. We responded to 52 of these, including 9 letters of substantial advice and 39 no comments, the later clearly illustrating the resource-hungry reality of our conservation planning work.

We were able to shine a spotlight on our achievements early in the New Year by providing detailed responses to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Rapid Review of Statutory Consultees commissioned from consultant Sam Richards. The Conservation Team went into overdrive, extracting data from our detailed records and particular thanks are due to Linden Groves, Alison Allighan, Jenifer White and Victoria Thompson in gathering data and drafting supporting text for our submission. While the outcome of the review is now unclear, it may be published independently of Government, it did allow us to put our work front and centre, helping to make a very strong case for additional funding should the Government wish to continue to benefit from our expertise as a statutory consultee.

This Rapid Review also usefully highlighted an ambiguity about our statutory consultee status. This status, which was confirmed in 2015, sets us apart from the other National Amenity Societies where there is no duty to consult on planning applications, only to notify. Our association with JCNAS has possibly and unintentionally contributed to this and we have taken every opportunity to clarify our status with DCMS, Historic England and other parties.

Moving forward, the Conservation Team are presently trialling new and focussed ways of working in response to reduced resources. This is also allowing us to train up other members of staff, such as Tamsin McMillan, as part of the Conservation Team and to further develop the skills and expertise of Daniel. Their enthusiasm and insights gained from their other Gardens Trust responsibilities will help perpetuate rounded and clear advice from the team. In the short term, however, we are having to pull back from other areas of support to CGTs and external customers, but we hope i) to reinstate this as soon as we can and ii) use this time to streamline our processes to become even more efficient and effective in our work to protect, conserve and promote historic parks and gardens.

The Conservation Team must consider some notably contentious or complex cases each year. Key recent examples include:

### Wimbledon Park

The Gardens Trust has advised on emerging proposals for the expansion of the All England Lawn Tennis Club onto Wimbledon Park Golf Course for a number of years. We have been broadly supportive of the scheme, accepting it as a better way to secure the future of the Grade II\* RPG as a whole. We have, however, continued to express our concerns about the scale of the proposed Parkland Stadium, the lack of clarity about the future unified management of the RPG and the provision of free and reasonable public access to the landscape in perpetuity. While much changed, Lancelot Brown's design intent for this important (now) urban park remains appreciable.

In March 2024, we were consulted on a new and specific Policy, N8.1, Wimbledon Park, to be included in the Merton Local Plan. This gave us the opportunity to suggest changes to the draft wording and to add other considerations consistent with our previous advice.

In May 2024, further revised proposals were received for the Northern and Southern Parklands. These included related and potential enhancement benefits to the RPG outside the application site to be secured by s106 agreements. While we welcome such proposals, we stressed these are an essential part of the scheme and not just an 'add on'.

The commercial operation of the AELTC is likely to restrict access to the AELTC parkland grounds during the Wimbledon Championship. The Gardens Trust has accepted this as part of the compromise to achieve a new public park to the east of a lake, together with a range of heritage benefits and other restoration measures which respect the remnant Brownian landscape.

### Norris Castle

Norris Castle on the Isle of Wight was a complex enabling development scheme, described as “cross funding” by the applicant, whereby new development within the Grade I registered RPG would provide sufficient financial gain to both repair and sustain the associated highly graded listed buildings as part of a new five-star hotel/leisure operation. The Gardens Trust has provided advice since 2022, supported by the Isle of Wight Gardens Trust. By Spring 2024, our concerns focused on three key issues: the harm to the RPG and its setting, the financial viability of the scheme and whether it would exacerbate claimed structural instability of the slope beneath the Grade I listed castle. The Gardens Trust and the Isle of Wight Gardens Trust maintained their objections to the scheme. Historic England was of the same mind as were other heritage organisations such as SAVE Britain’s Heritage. The proposals were refused by the Isle of Wight Council in May 2024.

### Hampton Court Railway Site

The Gardens Trust has made many representations on an extensive residential and commercial development proposals on land adjoining Hampton Court Station since c.2000. This has included the appearance by the eminent garden historian, Dr Sarah Rutherford, at Public Inquiry to support our evidence wherein The Gardens Trust advised the proposals would cause substantial harm to many local designated heritage assets, foremost to the setting of Hampton Court Palace on the opposite bank of the River Thames. Despite the granting of planning permission in July 2022, evidence at the Inquiry introduced the Southern Railway Act, 1913. This forbade the erection of any structure taller than fifty feet (c.15.24m) “within half a mile of any part of Hampton Court Palace”. This Act remains on the Statute Book and the development rises above fifty feet.

In Spring 2024, we were alerted by DCMS that they would oversee a new consultation on the proposals in relation to this Act. We were asked to submit any new information which had come forward since the Inquiry. We had no new information to share, but submitted a clear statement reiterating our previous concerns and drawing attention to a neighbouring development which also contravenes the Act. The outcome of the DCMS consultation is presently unknown but we remain committed to securing a positive solution to the Hampton Court Railway Site which would be more sympathetic to the setting of Hampton Court Palace.

### Botley West Solar Farm

This massive solar scheme covers 1300 ha of predominantly rural landscape in Oxfordshire and straddles three District boundaries: Cherwell, West Oxfordshire and White Horse. It is an NSIP (Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project) which will be determined by the Government through a separate planning process. The proposal is supported by Blenheim Estate, the majority landowner. Our advice was led by Chris Blandford who provided not only

a framework to help respond to future and similar proposals but also invaluable nuances critical to get our voice heard. Blenheim is a collection of heritage assets of the highest significance: a World Heritage Site and a Grade I registered RPG amongst others. While the proposal had no direct impact on the RPG itself, it did affect the wider historic estates which contribute to the setting of the Grade I listed Palace, its associated designed landscape and overall heritage interests. This formed the basis of our advice. More locally, invaluable knowledge and advice was provided by the Oxfordshire Gardens Trust, notably by Sarah Couch and Sally Stradling, as part of a joint response to the Phase II consultation early in 2024. They were able to ground-truth the scheme with Chris and Margie Hoffnung and to add essential insights into its effect on local features, such as lanes, woodlands and hedgerows, which all contribute to the character and special interest of the estates and, by default, to the setting of the designated heritage assets.

This will be an on-going case. A new consultation has recently opened to consider matters such as revised cable routes informed by previous advice. The scheme will continue to move forward through the NSIP process: Acceptance, Pre-examination, Examination, Recommendation and Decision. There will be opportunities for further representation including legal challenge of the eventual Decision, should that be necessary.

This is one of several large-scale and/or NSIP schemes presently on our radar. They are complex proposals supported by multiple documents which require much time and consideration. Historic England has recognised the need for local capacity to help review and advise on them and we will be developing a new joint training programme based initially in the East of England with the intention for it to be rolled out nationally.

### Studley Royal

The Gardens Trust continues to engage with proposals to redevelop the area of Canal Gates/Studley tea-room with improved visitor facilities at Studley Royal and Fountains Abbey, a Grade I RPG and a World Heritage Site (WHS).

We were invited to comment on a Heritage Scoping Report in 2020 by the site's majority owner, the National Trust. We expressed some concerns about the impact of the proposed visitor facilities such as a demonstration that all possible alternative locations for such facilities had been explored, the suitability of the then proposed architectural form of a new building extension to Studley Lodge and a need to complete an assessment of how the proposals effect the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the site.

In January 2023 representatives of the Gardens Trust and the Yorkshire Gardens Trust attended a site visit where revised planning and design drawings were shared and confirmation of the preparation of a detailed Design and Access Statement (DAS) and Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) was given.

The planning application and substantial supporting material were lodged with North Yorkshire Council in August 2023. This included comprehensive DAS and HIA. The application was reviewed and carefully considered, and the Conservation Committee and the Yorkshire Gardens Trust kept informed. A substantive response was issued by the Gardens Trust on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2023. Even though the application acknowledged the proposals would have some negative impacts on the heritage values of parts of the RPG, and some of the attributes that

underpin the OUV of the WHS, it was felt that, on balance, the proposals were reasonable given the competing considerations of a site which attracts c.600,000 visitor per year who make a vital contribution to its conservation. The Gardens Trust did not therefore object to the application.

The Yorkshire Gardens Trust did object to the application and submitted their own advice to North Yorkshire Council. This difference of opinion was openly discussed between the CGT and the GT ahead of time and the position of the CGT was acknowledged.

In March 2024, a Technical Review of the application was circulated by ICOMOS, the non-governmental organisation who oversee the selection and advise on the management of WHSs.

While sympathetic to the challenges of the National Trust at Studley Royal, its own assessment of the impact on the OUV of this part of the site meant ICOMOS could not support the project as presented.

Historic England, who did not object to the proposals, has subsequently encouraged the National Trust to modify their project in light of ICOMOS comments. We understand this is happening with revised plans to be submitted to North Yorkshire Council within an agreed extension window.

## **Education and Training Committee Report 2023/24**

### **Jill Sinclair, MA**

The Education and Training Committee was re-formed in January 2023 under the able chairmanship of Sally Jeffery, with Jill Sinclair taking the reins from September.

Our peer-reviewed journal *Garden History* published 10 new papers in 2023, covering topics including the New York Horticultural Society, John Ruskin gardening at Brantwood, Robert Marnock's Alexandra Park in Hastings, the Floral Legacy of a 17th century linen weaver and natural apple cultivars in Lithuania before the Second World War.

Our annual New Research Symposium this year covered fascinating international presentations on Sun Xiaoxiang, an early Chinese teacher of landscape architecture, by Chi Jen Li; imagery in 18th-century Polish theatre design, by Agnieszka Whelan; Luther Burbank's Santa Rosa 'garden of invention' by Soumyajit Basu; and the Mouton Ram in a lost City Beautiful, by Abigail Raynock Richard.

Our 19th Mavis Batey Essay Prize attracted a strong field and was won by University of Newcastle MA student Abigail Carr, for an examination of South Shields' Marine Park and the 19th-century conception of health and wellness.

2023 saw the launch of new postgraduate degree courses at the University of Buckingham in partnership with the Gardens Trust. These included the opportunity to pursue research at Master's level in any one of a wide range of garden and landscape-related topics. The course was established and run by Dr David Marsh, previously a Gardens Trust trustee, and for the academic year 2023/24 had 11 Master's students and 3 PhD candidates.

Our online talks programme, established during Covid and still proving popular, offered 92 events during 2023, welcoming over 11,000 attendees from Australia to Canada and Hong Kong to South Africa. Topics ranged from botanical art, plant hunting and archaeology to cemeteries, wildernesses and World Heritage landscapes, with speakers including architectural historian Otto Saumarez Smith, Gardeners World presenter Frances Tophill and maze expert Adrian Fisher. During the year we refined the programme so that it now runs twice a week, with a continued focus on high-calibre speakers exploring a broad range of topics.

2023 also saw us piloting in-person events again after the pandemic hiatus, welcoming over 200 people to talks and walks in London, trips to Chevening, Windsor Castle and Chiswick, a weekend garden-visiting in Wales, and a Designation conference.

Additionally, we were pleased to partner with other organisations, such as the Garden Museum, where we presented our popular Introduction to Garden History in 10 Objects, and Oxford University, with whom we welcomed 49 delegates to our annual study weekend, with the 2023 theme of Women and Gardens.

We also partnered with Sheffield Botanical Gardens for a summer celebration of Scottish landscape gardener, horticulturalist and writer Robert Marnock. Around three dozen events took place at sites around the country with links to Marnock, alongside a related article in our *Garden History* journal, some street art in Tunbridge Wells and even a conversation about



Marnock on the BBC's Bargain Hunt. The project also created a permanent online exhibition, viewed over 5,500 times during the celebrations, at [www.sbg.org.uk/celebrating-marnock](http://www.sbg.org.uk/celebrating-marnock)

In August 2023 our weekly blog written by David Marsh celebrated its 500th post and its 10th birthday. The first ever post was on New Year's Eve 2013, and the 499th looked at burial grounds. During 2023 the blog had 224,851 views from over 146,980 visitors, telling stories from the Angel of the North, to unicorns in medieval gardens, to golden apples, to Coronation Gardens. Most posts continue to attract readers years after they are first published, with most popular one so far being about Electroculture, standing currently at over 60,000 views.

A full report for 2024 will be supplied for the AGM in 2025 but highlights from the first six months of the year include garden visits to Exbury and Dorneywood, and online series on John Singer Sargent and gardens, people's parks, Roman gardens, community landscapes and the first in a new 6-part course on A History of Gardens, sponsored by Wooden Books. We also partnered with two county gardens trusts to present online series on Restoration in Action and presented a session on Writing Up Garden History, which attracted over 100 people and we hope will lead to more submissions for our essay prize, research symposium and *Garden History* journal.

We have also finalised plans to transfer John Harvey's garden history papers, which were left to the Garden History Society when he died, to the archives at the Newt in Somerset on long-term loan, and identified possible funding for a project to catalogue all our organisational and donated archives and, in the longer term, make them publicly accessible.

Almost all the work of the committee is delivered through a team of enthusiastic and knowledgeable volunteers and we wish to record our appreciation and thanks to all of them.

## **Audience Development, Marketing & Communications Committee Report 2023/24**

### **Rachel Savage**

Over the past twelve months ADMC has met quarterly in order to offer support and guidance to colleagues across the Gardens Trust in relation to volunteer support projects, audience development activity and the marketing and promotion of the events programme. It has been rewarding to see the legacy of the NLHF *Engaging with our Future* project living on through the success of initiatives such as the Community Champions activity and to witness the ongoing success in recruiting volunteers from a diversity of backgrounds and ages.

A priority for the committee this year has been to support the delivery of further improvements to the website and review the overall performance of our website in terms of user experience and engagement. The website goes from strength to strength with around 200 site visits a day and a click through rate of 1.6%, both of which are good benchmarks for an organisation the size of the Gardens Trust. Digital communications across a range of platforms also continue to reach new audiences and encourage those new to garden history to find out more.

Alongside improvements to the website the committee has contributed to the development of membership recruitment activity including testing a range of digital promotions, taking advantage of free Google Ads and focusing on key dates in the calendar such as Christmas gift promotions and Mother's Day. A special 'Seal the Deal' promotion developed for in-person events such as Gardeners World Live has also proved to be successful.

With the appointment of Tara Hamdi as the Gardens Trust's first fundraiser the committee has worked with her to produce the annual member appeal and also to develop and launch the new Patrons Scheme. There have been other fundraising successes with support from individuals, funders and corporate supporters all being secured, including sponsorship from Wooden Books for the events programme.

Building on the review of membership subscriptions that was carried out last year, further work has been undertaken to review organisational subscriptions with an increase in payments anticipated to come into effect in the autumn.

At the June ADMC meeting we were delighted to welcome Sharon Turner from London Gardens Trust as a new member of the committee. Over the coming months Sharon will be working with Linden Groves to produce a report on the value of historic parks and gardens, a piece of work which will be invaluable in helping to make the case for their conservation not just from a heritage perspective but also from a social and economic point of view.

As ever I am grateful for all of the time, commitment and expertise that individual members bring to the committee and look forward to working alongside them in the coming year.